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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001875

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/28/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: WILL HE OR WON'T HE?: BACKGROUND TO DEBATE ON  
EMERGENCY DECREE

REF: A. BANGKOK 1845 (SONTHI ASKS FOR EMERGENCY POWERS)  
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 1177 (PTV)

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY and INTRODUCTION: According to breaking news reports, Prime Minister Surayud announced this evening that he would not agree to institute emergency measures in Bangkok in advance of a demonstration to be held tomorrow. The PM was responding to a request from GEN Sonthi, head of the coup council, who said asked for emergency powers to fend off instability caused by anti-government demonstrations. Although we welcome the PM's decision, this issue is unlikely to go away, as demonstrations against the government and coup leaders are likely to continue and probably grow. The root causes of the junta's anxiety remain. The background information below provides insights into this week's debate from a variety of sources. Based on these reports, it appears that the CNS pressed hard for the PM to invoke the 2005 Emergency Decree, to block the next in a series of anti-CNS demonstrations spearheaded by politicians loyal to former PM Thaksin. According to one story, Surayud offered to resign rather than support the introduction of emergency measures. Opinion among political contacts is strongly against the measure, and most of the press loudly condemned the proposal, although there are some voices arguing the need for "stability." The demonstrators appear determined to go ahead with their protest, although they may be forced to change the venue. End summary and introduction.

HOW DID THIS START?

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[1](#)2. (C) According to one credible source, GEN Sonthi contacted the ringleader of the pro-Thaksin demonstrators at the beginning of the week. He asked that the demonstrators leave the Palace (and Privy Counselor Prem) out of their speeches. (This group targeted the Privy Councilor before, marching on his house during their March 18 protest). The general was also concerned that they would publicly disclose the not-so-secret fact that Sonthi (a Muslim) has two wives. (According to one source, this violates military rules and could lead to pressure for disciplinary action against

Sonthi.) Demonstration leader Veera Musikaphong reportedly declined these requests.

13. (C) CNS Secretary-General Winai and GEN Sonthi then began floating the idea of invoking the 2005 Emergency Decree in Bangkok to prevent the protests from gathering steam. (Septel provides information on the contents of the Emergency Decree.) They spoke to several news outlets, raising concerns about the demonstrations gaining momentum and leading to "chaos." GEN Sonthi told the press on Wednesday that he had asked PM Surayud to invoke the Emergency Decree to give the security forces the powers they needed to preserve stability.

#### PRIME MINISTER'S REACTION

14. (C) Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn (protect), a noted scholar on security issues and a long-time contact, gave us a read-out on the PM's meeting with academics on Wednesday. This regularly-scheduled meeting turned into a discussion of the emergency decree proposal. Panitan said that the CNS was pressing the PM hard to invoke the decree. The media has reacted very strongly against the CNS suggestion, sending the PM a good signal. Panitan said that the academics advised the PM that, in order to invoke the Emergency Decree, there should first be a clear emergency. For the public to support this measure, they must see that the situation is getting out of control. The recent small demonstrations do not justify the introduction of emergency measures, and the public will not accept it, Panitan said.

15. (C) Panitan noted that Surayud is a cautious man and he

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wanted to consider the matter carefully, even as the CNS pressed for the decision "very soon" -- before the demonstration on March 30. "This is exactly what we needed the PM for, so he can face pressure," Panitan said, adding that Surayud may not know much about finance or economics, but he understands security issues. "Like the King said, he is difficult to move either way." Panitan said that the government/CNS were very perturbed about the effects of upcoming TRT dissolution case, and the possible opposition to the draft constitution, suggesting these factors were important in the request for emergency powers.

16. (C) Former TRT Parliament speaker Bhokin also told us that, in his opinion as well, Surayud did not want to invoke the emergency decree. He wants to use soft measures, but the CNS is afraid things will snowball and get out of control. Several well-placed business contacts had heard that Surayud had offered to resign rather than agree to Sonthi's request. PM Surayud's refusal had caused GEN Sonthi to lose face. They said that some business leaders had expressed support for the emergency declaration because they were concerned about stability, and also because they believed that Sonthi would be "the next prime minister" and they wanted to get on his good side.

17. (C) Former TRT Minister Suranand had also heard that Surayud offered his resignation, and said, "it could happen this weekend." He added that the CNS and the government are very far apart, and the CNS might not care anymore if Surayud resigned. TRT's Bhokin was unhappy with the prospect of Surayud resigning, saying he was "the best one" and "democratic." Sonthi as PM would be "dangerous;" there were already divisions within the junta, and they would increase if Sonthi made a power grab. A Chart Thai member, on the other hand, thought that a new PM would be a good thing - but he had no idea who might replace Surayud.

18. (C) Another academic predicted that Surayud would ultimately cave in to CNS pressure, whatever he decided today. The CNS's very public demand for emergency power would be hard for the PM to resist in the longer run. The

CNS is clearly overreacting, but they are less afraid of the size of the demonstrations than they are of what the group will say. They are particularly sensitive about discussions of Privy Councilor Prem's role in the coup and current politics, and fear the criticism might "go beyond Prem to the King. Or the Queen. The Queen is more the target." (Note: One recurrent rumor has the Queen and Prem quietly supporting the September coup, while keeping the King, recuperating from his back surgery, out of the picture. End note.)

¶9. (C) The academic was concerned that the emergency declaration could "boomerang" and provoke wider protest, a worry echoed by human rights contacts. He raised the prospect that the CNS was looking for the opportunity to launch a repeat coup, since they have completely botched the September coup and they are "in a corner." The generals were prepared for war, but not Thai politics, "and Thai politics are tougher." Even if the emergency decree is not invoked this week, "the ultimate problem is that the coup has gone wrong."

¶10. (U) According to breaking news reports this evening, following Surayud's meetings with the CNS this afternoon, the PM announced that the situation, "has yet to reach the point that required a state of emergency be implemented." He reiterated that it was in his authority to decide the matter.

#### PROTESTERS' PLANS

¶11. (C) According to news reports, the police, Bangkok Metropolitan Authority and First Army have jointly decided to ban all activities that include the use of a PA system at the planned demonstration site at Sanam Luang. The protesters announced that they would move their demonstration to the

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front of the Bangkok governor's house. The demonstration will include about a dozen groups. Estimates of participants range from about 4,000 to 10,000.

¶10. (C) The generals are particularly worried about the Thaksin loyalists who have tried to start a cable TV station, PTV; this group, led by Weera Musikaphong, is the nucleus of the protest movement (ref B). News reports claim there is evidence that the group is directly funded by former PM Thaksin. Weera's colorful history may be part of the reason the generals are so worried about his group. A former deputy minister and government spokesman, Weera was involved in the abortive 1977 coup, and jailed for 8 months before being granted an amnesty. He was prosecuted for lese-majeste while he was deputy interior minister, in connection with his 1986 campaign for the general election (NFI), he was sentenced to 4 years imprisonment, but was granted a royal pardon after one month. He was also arrested for opposing former dictator GEN Suchinda in 1992. Although he claims to have quit TRT recently in order to run PTV, he is still viewed as a close Thaksin supporter.

#### COMMENT

¶12. (C) Although it appears that the Prime Minister has made the right call today, it will be difficult for him to resist the CNS's request for additional powers in the longer run, if the demonstrations grow larger and more provocative -- which they are likely to do. Surayud's decision also brings out into the open the rift between himself and CNS chief Sonthi, which may contribute further to the general concerns about stability. While we welcome today's decision, we recognize that it does not solve the underlying problem. As our contact said, "the ultimate problem is that the coup has gone wrong." Neither Sonthi nor Surayud appears to know how to set it right again.

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